

Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*: Semiotics Study

Asst. Lect. Hussein Mohammed Abdul Ridha Al-Gburi

hussientranslator@gmail.com

Faculty of Pharmacy, Islamic University, Najaf, Iraq

Dr. Doaa Taher Matrood AL-dihaymawee

doaa.t.al.dihaymawee@jmu.edu.iq

Department of Physiology, College of Medicine, Jabir ibn Hayyan Medical University, Najaf, Iraq

Asst. Lect. Yousif Ali Yousif Salman

yousuf.en.hum@uodiyala.edu.iq

Department of English, College of Human Sciences, Diyala University, Diyala, Iraq

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to explore the basics of semiotic analysis in general and the semiotic Theory formulated by the American philosopher Charles Stander Peirce in particular. Thus, after providing a number of definitions for semiotics from the point of view of several scholars and providing a clear representation of Peirce's Theory, the researcher selects a short story by the great Irish writer Oscar Wilde as a sample to apply Peirce's Theory to it.

Key words: *Happy Prince, Icon, Index, Oscar Wilde, Peirce, Swallow, Symbol, and Semiotics.*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Oscar Wilde is an Irish playwright, novelist, poet, and critic. His full name was Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854, the son of Dr. William (later Sir William) Wilde, a surgeon, and Jane Francesca Elgee, well known under the pen name Speranza. Wilde studied classics at Trinity College, Dublin (1871–74), and then at Magdalen College, Oxford (1874–78), wherein, in 1878, he won the Newdigate Prize for his poem *Ravenna* (Bloom, 2008, p.1).

Wilde was significantly affected by the death of his sister. Isola Wilde was born in April 1857. The youngest of the Wilde family, she also became the center of the household. Wilde told his friend Robert Harborough Sherard that Isola had been like 'a golden ray of sunshine dancing about our home'.² In 1867, when Wilde was 11 and Isola 9, she became extremely ill and, after a partial recovery, was sent to stay with an aunt in Edgeworthstown, County Longford. Unfortunately, her fever returned and she died. While this death was devastating for the whole (Killeen, 2005, p.25) family, it appears to have affected her brother Oscar the deepest. (Killeen, 2005, p.26)

In 1884, Oscar married a rich Irish woman called Constance Lloyd, and the couple had two sons. After 1888, he spent nearly all his time writing the works for which we now remember him. He wrote two books of fairy stories for his children, *The Happy Prince* and *A House of*

Pomegranates, and then a book of short stories – *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*. He also wrote a famous novel called *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. (Macmillan Publishers., 2013, p.1) which appeared in Lippincott's Magazine in 1890 and in book form in 1891. Also, in 1891, Wilde's play *The Duchess of Padua* was produced in New York under another title and anonymously, without much success. (Bloom, 2008, p.1)

Between 1892 and 1895, Oscar returned to writing plays. One of these, *Salomé*, from the Old Testament story of St John the Baptist, was written in French and was intended for the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt. The other four plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are comedies. They are very witty plays, full of short, memorable sentences. All these plays were very successful in London, but in the year that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first produced, Oscar suddenly fell from public favor. (Macmillan Publishers., 2013, p.1)

Although he was a married man with two children he loved, Oscar had always preferred men to women. He was a homosexual. Homosexuality was illegal in England at this time. (Macmillan Publishers., 2013, p.1). Oscar's closest companion was a young man named Lord Alfred Douglas, or 'Bosie,' as his friends called him. Bosie's father, Lord Queensberry, was angry about his son's friendship with Wilde. He made public statements that identified Oscar as gay. Although this was true, it was not good for Oscar's public reputation. (Macmillan Publishers., 2013, p.2) Oscar was given a little time to leave the country – many gay English people at that time went to live in France, where the laws were more relaxed. But Oscar did not leave England. He was arrested, tried, and sent to prison for two years. (Macmillan Publishers., 2013, p.2)

Wilde, after two trials, was imprisoned for homosexual offenses in 1895. In prison, where he remained for two years, Wilde wrote a letter to Lord Alfred that was partially published in 1905 as *De Profundis*. It contained his own justification for his conduct. After his release in 1897, Wilde went to France, where he published "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898), inspired by his prison experiences. (Bloom, 2008, p.2)

To talk about Wilde's fiction is to talk about everything, for Oscar Wilde was his own best work of art. Born and educated in Ireland, Wilde came from a country that gives a privileged status to fiction. In the words of his predecessor, William Carleton, meditating on 'Paddy's' skill at the alibi: 'Fiction is the basis of society, the bond of commercial prosperity, the channel of communication between nation and nation, and not infrequently the interpreter between a man and his own conscience.'¹ It follows that if fiction is the very stuff by which society is made, Wilde could only become a writer - and an Irishman -in England. Only there could he create himself through the fiction that formed 'the channel of communication between nation and nation,' the stereotypes by which one understood the other. A member of the leading class known as Anglo-Irish, Wilde created himself by living on both sides of the hyphen (Ireland and England). (Raby, 1997, p.96)

Wilde stated that 'my works are dominated by myself,' adding that no dramatic author, and by implication no author of any kind, had ever influenced him even 'in the smallest degree'. (Powell & Raby, 2013, p. xxiii) Today, Oscar is best remembered as a social commentator. His novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is still read and admired. Many of his stories and plays are also still immensely enjoyed. But of all his work, it is his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which remains a masterpiece of nineteenth-century theatre. Like his earlier plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full of witty and clever sayings, but everything in the middle-class society it describes is mocked. It is wonderfully funny and touchingly close to the real-life story of this brilliant but tragic writer. (Macmillan Publishers, 2013, p.2) His work emphasizes not only his ability to imagine new worlds but also his bond to the turbulent cultural and historical

landscape around him – the context within which his life and art took shape. (Powell & Raby, 2013, p. xxiii)

Semiotic as science

Throughout history, the term "sign" has taken many forms, including words, images, and objects, although signs have no intrinsic meaning unless we provide them. (Chandler, 2004) The first known reference to the term sign can be found in ancient Greek, where it. (Friedman & Thellefsen, p.649) appears to be connected to the word Semeion, which stands for "mark" or "sign." In the nineteenth century, deliberation on the meaning of the term continued in two schools of thought that provided different interpretations: Saussure and Peirce. In this paper, we focus on Peirce's sign theory (Friedman & Thellefsen, p.650).

A sign can be defined, basically, as any entity (words, images, objects, etc.) that refers to something else. (Curtin, 2009) For example, Smoke is a sign of fire, a weather vane is a sign of wind direction, a mark on a fever thermometer is a sign of body temperature, and a rose is a sign of love; Christian –the cross is a sign for Christianity and The traffic light is a sign of "stop" or "go." According to Eco (1984, p.1), the sign is usually considered as a correlation between a signifier and a signified (or between expression and content) and, therefore, as an action between pairs (Eco, 1984, p.1). Thus, the sign is the origin of the semiotic processes (Eco, 1984, p.1), and semiotics is the study of signs. However, the term sign must not be limited to common understanding, such as a street sign billboard, astrologically sign, or bumper sticker. Eco (1976), a well-known semiotician, writes, "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else". (p. 7) Chandler (1999) asserts, "We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics".

Sometimes, one sign has more than one meaning, such as "Red," which stands for love, apple, fire, and blood. Additionally, the sign is different from one culture to another, from one

country to another, and from one period to another. For example, the symbol:



Nero's cross, which was invited by the Roman Empire Nero, refers here to a movement against Christianity when he crossed Boutros on an upside cross. While it is now, it relates to peace. This sign, with it is modern meaning, was invited by Gerald Heltom as a sign of a movement against nuclear weapons.

These signs have different meanings according to different cultures and countries. For example:



This sign is used in America to mean "good," "ok," or "fine." While in Australia, the same sign is used with the meaning of "vituperation." Another example is



In America, this means, "I love you."

In Hawaii, "clam down."

In Western Europe it means "ten" or "I give up".

In Greece, it means "vituperation".

But at the same time, there are signs that are universal use, such as traffic lights. All the people agree that "red "means "stop," "yellow " means "wait," and "green" is "move." Also, on the "tap," there are two colors, red and blue, and all the people concur that red refers to " hot water" while blue refers to "tepid water."

Semiotics has a broad scope; it swings between both human language and animal communication. Morris' semiotics is wider and narrower than the science of signs of Peirce. *"both the founders of semiotics defined the Theory of signs as the study of signs of any kind including the language of any other signs "*. Peirce believed that semiotics were concerned only with man, while Morris extended the scope of semiotics to include the sign process of animals, which is known as zoo semiotics or generally by organism. The scope of Morris is characterized by a "fundamental departure from the Priscian tradition." Pierce's semiotics is based on the philosophy that "every thought is a sign". In spite of the differences between them, both agreed that something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpretation: "Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (Noth, 1990, p.49).

Peirce's Theory of semiotic

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914; pronounced "purse") was early recognized as "one of the great figures in the history of semiotics" and as "the founder of the modern theory of signs". (Weiss & Burks 1945: 383) A universal genius in many sciences, Peirce, who was largely ignored by his contemporaries, is now unanimously acclaimed as America's greatest philosopher. His writings consist of thousands of papers. (Noth, 1990, p.39)

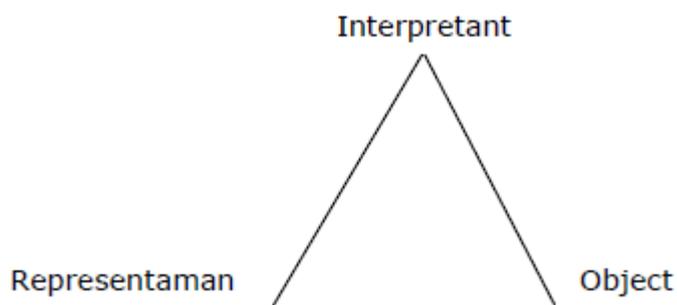
He was not interested in semiotics only, but he was a polymath, which means that he made significant contributions to many fields of study, including phenomenology to astronomy and from physics to metaphysics. The vast number of his outputs calculated as 12000 pages, which were published, and 9000 manuscript pages are still unpublished during his life. Language and linguistics are among the main topics. Many of his writings remained unexplored until today. He made a lot of suggested papers on omissions and errors in the Oxford Dictionary. Also, he wrote about morphemes and words, especially in (common nouns, proper nouns, pronouns, and verb prepositions). The importance of Pierce semiotics achieved in language was first discovered by Roman Jakobson, who made a reference to Peirce in all his works. In 1977, Jakobson called Peirce "the pathfinder in the science of language."

Finally, Peirce wrote to Lady Welby¹ On December 23, 1908: *"It has never been in my power to study anything—mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology, except as a study of semiotics"* .this show the important of semiotics as a science. (Peirce, 1977)

The meaning of a sign, in Peircean philosophy, is not to be found in the signified or in the referent; it must instead be sought in the whole triadic relation between the sign, its represented *object*, and its interpretant, which is defined as the effect the sign creates in the interpreting mind.

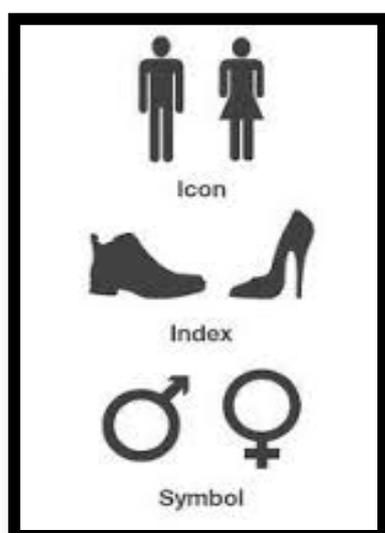
¹Victoria Welby is a philosopher of language, musician, and watercolor artist; now, she is considered the "founding mother of semiotics."¹

(Besbes, 2007, p.20) The three components can then be represented by the semiotic triangle shown below:



(Sharp, 2011, p.2).

The dotted line represents the fact that there is not an observable or direct relationship between the representation and the object (Chandler, 1999). According to Peirce's model of a sign then, "the traffic light sign for 'stop' would consist of a red light facing traffic at an intersection (the representamen); vehicles halting (the object) and the idea that a red light indicates that vehicles must stop (the interpretant)". (Sharp, 2011, p.2)



Peirce has made his famous trichotomy of sign functions, which suggests that the central relationship in semiotics is the relation between the sign and its object. Peirce referred to this trichotomy as "the most fundamental division of signs. (Noth, 1990, p. 44) There are three ways in which the sign can stand for its object: as an icon, index, or symbol.

-Icon

The basic idea behind iconic signs is similitude, which means that there is a direct similarity between the sign vehicle and its signified. This is, clearly, a very general law, so that virtually any form of similitude between sign and object suffices, in principle, to establish an iconic relationship: "An icon is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes of characters of its own, and which it possesses Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it." (Elam, 1980, p. 14) Examples

of iconic signs given by Peirce himself include the figurative painting. Another example of iconic signs is portraits or a diagram of a house because they resemble the subject they represent. (Martin & Ringham, 2000, p.73)

-Index

Indexical signs are causally connected with their objects, often physically or through contiguity. Peirce said that An Index is a sign that refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object. (Elam, 1980, p. 14). Examples given by Peirce are a weathercock, a barometer, and a sundial. A knock at the door indicating that there is someone at the door is another example of a sign seen as an index. Pointing my finger at a dog is the index of a dog. A high temperature may be seen as an index of illness (Martin & Ringham, 2000, p.76). Smoke is a sign of fire and Handwriting. The 'natural' cause-and-effect signs and verbal deixis (personal and demonstrative pronouns such as 'I,' 'you,' 'this,' 'that,' and adverbs such as 'here' and 'now,' etc.) (Elam, 1980, p. 14)

-Symbol

In Peirce's semiotics, the term symbol denotes a sign (signifier) whose relationship to its object (signified) is entirely arbitrary or based on convention. So, there is no direct relationship between the object and the sign, and to know the meaning of a symbol, we should have previous knowledge about the symbol.) An example would be the word 'car,' where there is no causal physical link or resemblance or relationship between the sign (the word car) and its object . In his system of classification, Peirce distinguishes signs used as symbols from those used as icons or as indices (index). In traditional literary usage, a symbol relates a word or idea to a concrete object, scene, or action with which it entertains some kind of semantic connection.

Thus, in a particular culture, a rose may be a symbol of love, a bird of freedom, a forest of madness, or a water of life. A symbol, therefore, is based on a relationship between two individual units (one figurative, one thematic), whereas a semi-symbol is the product of the relationship between two categories. Examples of symbols are numbers, flags, punctuation, brands, etc... (Martin & Ringham, 2000, p.128)

Applying Charles Stander Peirce's semiotic Theory on the Happy Prince

Love and Friendship

Within this category, there is one type of friendship and two types of love.

The Swallow is a symbol of friendship and loyalty as he stays behind his friends to help the happy Prince. As far as love is concerned, the story begins with The Swallow's love for Reed: "he was in love with the most beautiful Reed." Still, she cannot fly as she is "I admit that she is domestic" and "so attached to her home," thus, she is a symbol of patriotism as the story is written in a time when Ireland was under British rule, so this reed stands for the loving and loyal people have for their country who cannot leave their home no matter what happens.

Nearly the end of the story, the swallow requests to kiss the happy Prince's hand, "Will you let me kiss your hand?" but the happy Prince suggests a kiss on the lips: "You must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.", this is where the relationship between the Swallow and the Happy Prince has taken a massive step toward as they have crossed the line of friendship and become clearly lovers. The controversy is that the Prince and the Swallow of the same sex are a symbol of homosexual love, and it is not very welcome in a book written for children as Oscar Wilde is himself a homosexual person, and he tries to represent this idea to the children in a lovely way.

Sacrifice

The Happy Prince is a symbol of sacrifice as he asks the Swallow to pick "*the great ruby from the Prince's sword*" and give it to the poor seamstress and her boy, who is very sick. Later

on, the Happy Prince asks the Swallow to pick up the sapphires in his eyes and deliver one for the poor playwright and the other for the poor match girl. After that, he asks the Swallow to take off the golden leaf that covers his body (the statue) and give it to the poor. "I am covered with fine gold," said the Prince, "you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor"

At the end of the story where the Prince gives all he owns, but there is still poverty; this is an index to the fact that today's situation of poverty is a worldly problem that cannot be solved unless the people in power do their best before it is too late.

Though it is clear that the Happy Prince is a symbol of sacrifice, so is the Swallow; he has left it too late to fly to Egypt, and as such, the cold of winter kills him. This is important as it highlights just how dedicated the Swallow is to the Happy Prince. On several occasions, he could have abandoned the Happy Prince but chose to stay with him as the Happy Prince helped others. If anything, the Swallow has served the Happy Prince well even though he did pay the ultimate price for his actions.

The Suffering of men and women

The first character that the Happy Prince asks the Swallow to help is the seamstress: "Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress." The Happy Prince is capable of seeing her through the open window: "The windows are open [*sic*]"; thus, the open window is a symbol of hope for this poor woman and her sick son.

"a bunch of withered violets" is an icon of the poor state of the young playwright who has no fire to warm his cold body in order to finish his play in time and has some money to pay for wood for the fire and some food as he becomes skinny because of hunger "There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint."

After the happy Prince gives his two sapphire eyes to the playwright and the match girl, he asks the Swallow to fly over to the city to tell him about what he sees. The swallow "saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates," which is a symbol of the contrast between the lives of people during the Victorian age, which the great British novelist Charles Dickens describes as "the best of time, and the worst of times," as the European people discover new lands and significant development in different fields in sciences. However, still, there is a dreadful poverty.

Hypocrisy

The Mayor and his Counselors want to get rid of the happy prince statue because it is not as beautiful as before, "*The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer...he is little better than a beggar*" "*And here is actually a dead bird at his feet!*" This is an icon representation of the fact that people are constantly being deceived by appearances. Thus, while the Happy Prince is adorned in finery, he is judged to be a symbol of prosperity in the town. Yet when his finery disappears, he no longer looks as attractive as he had previously been. The Mayor and the Counselors want to remove him. If anything, the appearance of the Happy Prince is more important to the Mayor and the Counselors than the idea of helping the other citizens in the town. The Happy Prince, throughout the story, is the only one who thinks logically and practically. He knows that his ruby, sapphire, and gold are worth more to those in need than it is to him. In reality, the Happy Prince sacrifices everything that he has, including his eyesight, in order to help others. Yet the Mayor and the Councillors do nothing to help others. Being too preoccupied with their own sense of self-importance. For the Mayor and the Councillors, their roles in the town mean more to them than actually helping the people of the city. They are driven by their egos and the self-belief that they know best. Yet many in the city live in poverty.

Additionally, "We must have another statue, of course," he said, "and it shall be a statue of myself." the argument about whose statue should be next is an index representation that nothing

is going to remain forever, especially in political rule, as some of them are greedy to want to force the people to forget other good rulers and establish themselves failing that they also will go at someday and be replaced by others.

Leaden Heart

"This broken lead heart will not melt," the Prince's lead heart is an icon sign as it cannot be melted because it is made of lead; the hidden meaning is to deliver the sense of immortality to the reader as Bebel emphasizes the idea that when one sacrifices their own health and wealth and happiness for others, they become immortal. The lead heart of the Prince cannot be melted because the Prince is forever eternal.

Conclusion

The background of the study about Oscar Wilde's life provides the researcher with information that helps in understanding the hidden meaning of this fairy tale. Charles Stander Peirce is one of the great American philosophers who provided many studies in various fields, one of them being semiotics. However, depending on his Theory of semiotics in analyzing Wilde's short story "The Happy Prince," many simple signs lead to significant deep meaning.

Reference

1. Besbes, K. (2007). *The Semiotic of Beckett's Theatre: A Semiotic Study of the Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett*. Florida: Universal Publishers.
2. Bloom, H.(2008) *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: Oscar Wilde*. USA: Bloom's Literary Criticism.
3. Chandler, D. (1999). *Semiotics for Beginners*.
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html>
4. Chandler, D. (2004). *Semiotics for Beginners*. Oxford: Routledge.
5. Curtin, B. (2009) *Semiotics and Visual Representation*. International Program in Design and Architecture.
6. Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. USA: Indiana University Press.
7. Eco, U. (1984). *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. USA: Indiana University Press.
8. Elam, K. (1980). *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Routledge.
9. Friedman, Al. & Thellefsen, M. (2011), "Concept theory and semiotics in knowledge Organization", *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 67 Iss 4 pp. 644 – 674.
10. Killeen, J. (2005) *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde: Catholicism, Folklore and Ireland*. New York: the Palgrave Macmillan.
11. Macmillan Publishers. (2013). *Macmillan Guided Readers*. Macmillan Publishers.
12. Martin, B. & Ringham, F. (2000) *Dictionary of semiotics*. London: CASSELL.
13. Noth, W. (1990) *Handbook of Semiotics*. USA: Indiana University Press.
14. Noth, W (2000) *Charles Sanders Peirce, Pathfinder in Linguistics*. URL:
<http://www.digitalpeirce.fee.unicamp.br/p-ling.htm>
(Accessed, 2018 November27)
15. Peirce, C. S. (1977) *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. Hardwick, C. S. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
16. Powell, K, & Raby, P. (2013) *Oscar Wilde in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. Raby, P. (1997). *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
18. Sharp. J. H. (2011). *Semiotics as a Theoretical Foundation of Information Design*. USA: Wilmington, North Carolina.
19. Weiss, Paul, and Burks, Arthur. 1945. Peirce's sixty-six signs. *Journal of Philosophy* 42: 38389.